

Stars fell on Pinner, Middlesex

THE TOUCHING STORY OF A LOCAL BOY'S GENEROSITY

Come fly with us all the way to sunny Los Angeles with young self-made millionaire REG DWIGHT as he takes his mother and a party of dear old friends on the holiday of a lifetime, all expenses paid.

P.S: STEVE CLARKE went as well

THE STARS on Hollywood Boulevard stretch for three miles and they're there day and night, all year round. There's some 3,000 of them, pressed into the sidewalks (as they say). They're gold-coloured, about the size of a small coffee table, each with the name of some personality or other inscribed in the centre.

It's just another symptom of the supreme tackiness that's apparent everywhere in Los Angeles. The stars began as commemorative devices for movie idols in the '30s, but now some of them represent local dignitaries who never had anything whatever to do with the movie business.

Naturally, rock stars have their stars on Hollywood Boulevard these days. After all, LA spells home for a fair-sized contingent of the rock elite. In an area known as Homely Hills (see what I mean about tackiness?), more exclusive than Beverley Hills or Bel Air, George Harrison is neighbours with Barbra Streisand. And further along this stretch of unabated affluence you'll find Rod Stewart's immodest pad.

Round the corner is Cher's mansion, the outer precincts of which are often jammed by parked cars inhabited by kids who're just waiting for glimpses of the lady and her old man.

Just recently Elton John, LA's favourite Englishman if record sales are anything to go by, had his star inlaid on Hollywood Boulevard during a

week designated "Elton John Week". However, that's not quite as big a deal as it sounds since it's also been "Rick Nelson Day" out here in LA. Rick too has his star on the Boulevard. So does Lassie.

IT'S AROUND two in the afternoon of a crisp, late-October English day. Over 120 people have boarded a chartered Boeing 707, dubbed "The Rock Of The Westies", for the ten and a half hour flight from Heathrow to Los Angeles.

The record of the same name is playing over speakers usually reserved for muzak to calm the nerves of unwilling passengers.

What is undoubtedly one of the most philanthropic gestures by A Rock Star And His Manager is about to get underway. Yes readers, Elton John and his 26-year-old manager John Reid have forked out 50 grand to fly out their relations (Elton's mum's there in a "Captain Fantastic" T shirt; so's her next-door neighbour from Pinner, Middlesex, too), friends, employees and a handful of journalists to celebrate Elton's weekend Dodger Stadium gigs which, as things turn out, will represent the zenith of Reg's career.

Not only will this motley entourage be flown to LA and back, but they'll also be put up in a local Holiday Inn (meals included) and shown round some of the city's foremost attractions.

There are even free rides at Disneyland... and do you think we have to pay for our Glamor Tram trek around Hollywood's Universal Studios? Not likely. And to compound the philanthropy, when we board the jet there's a Pan Am bag full of goodies on each seat — including a camera, no less.

Oh, and the booze is free too.

Russell Harty's here. So's Rodney Marsh, and rock promoters Harvey Goldsmith and Mel Bush.

The plane stops at Seattle to clear customs and as we prepare for the final haul to LA John Reid boards to tumultuous applause from some of those present.

THE SEASONS are not very strongly defined in Los Angeles. To the Englishman at least, it's summer all year round. In fact some say LA's at its best in the fall since the smog that collects in the mountain enclosed basin doesn't assert itself so much.

Average day-time temperatures in 'autumn' are in the lower '70s. Rain's not so unusual, but still unusual enough. When it rained half-way through "Elton John Week" it made filmed coverage on the news.

When "The Rock Of The Westies" touches down at LA International Airport it's as clear an evening as you'll get anywhere, no trace of chill in the air at all. Elton has driven from his Beverley Hills home to greet us, but he's back inside one of the fleet of black limos so fast I can't even tell you what he was wearing.

It's still only mid-evening, which means there's a full day to recover from the rigours of the flight before the first of Elton's two Dodger Stadium gigs at the weekend.

Elton John first played LA five years ago. Since that date at The Trou-

badour, the inhabitants of Southern California have bought more of his records than they have of any other rock artist. At Tower Records on Sunset — the world's largest record store which guarantees to stock every record that's catalogued — they say that only Linda Ronstadt sells as many.

At every record store you visit you're bombarded with Elton displays.

But surprisingly his face doesn't occupy one of the massive recording artist display hoardings that line Sunset Strip. Bruce Springsteen's up there and he's been out of town for several days now. But then no-one's trying to hype Elton John. The purpose of this extravagant expedition is not to gain press coverage, but merely a gesture self-sufficient in itself.

Afterall, there are no more than half-a-dozen journalists present. Only a man from the *Telegraph* supplement gets as far as an interview with Our

Hero. Three of us don't even get introduced to EJ.

Elton John is far and away the '70s most successful record maker. In America he's sold more singles than any other artist with, according to John Reid, The Carpenters and Paul McCartney trailing behind. Nine of his albums have gone platinum (you need to sell a million units to receive a platinum disc) in the States and Reid reckons he's sold something like 70 or 80 million records world-wide.

He doesn't know for sure.

It was reported that Elton's re-signing with MCA for America and Canada guaranteed him eight million dollars in royalties against all the albums he produces in the next five years. Reid says the figure was under-reported — "I don't like quoting figures but it's substantially more than eight."

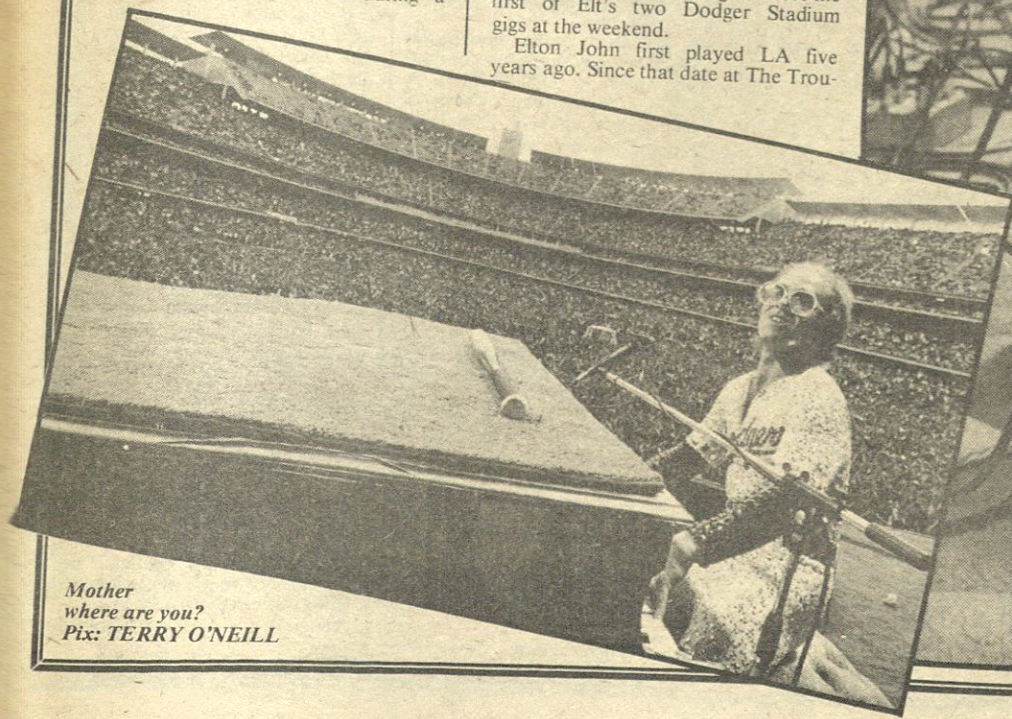
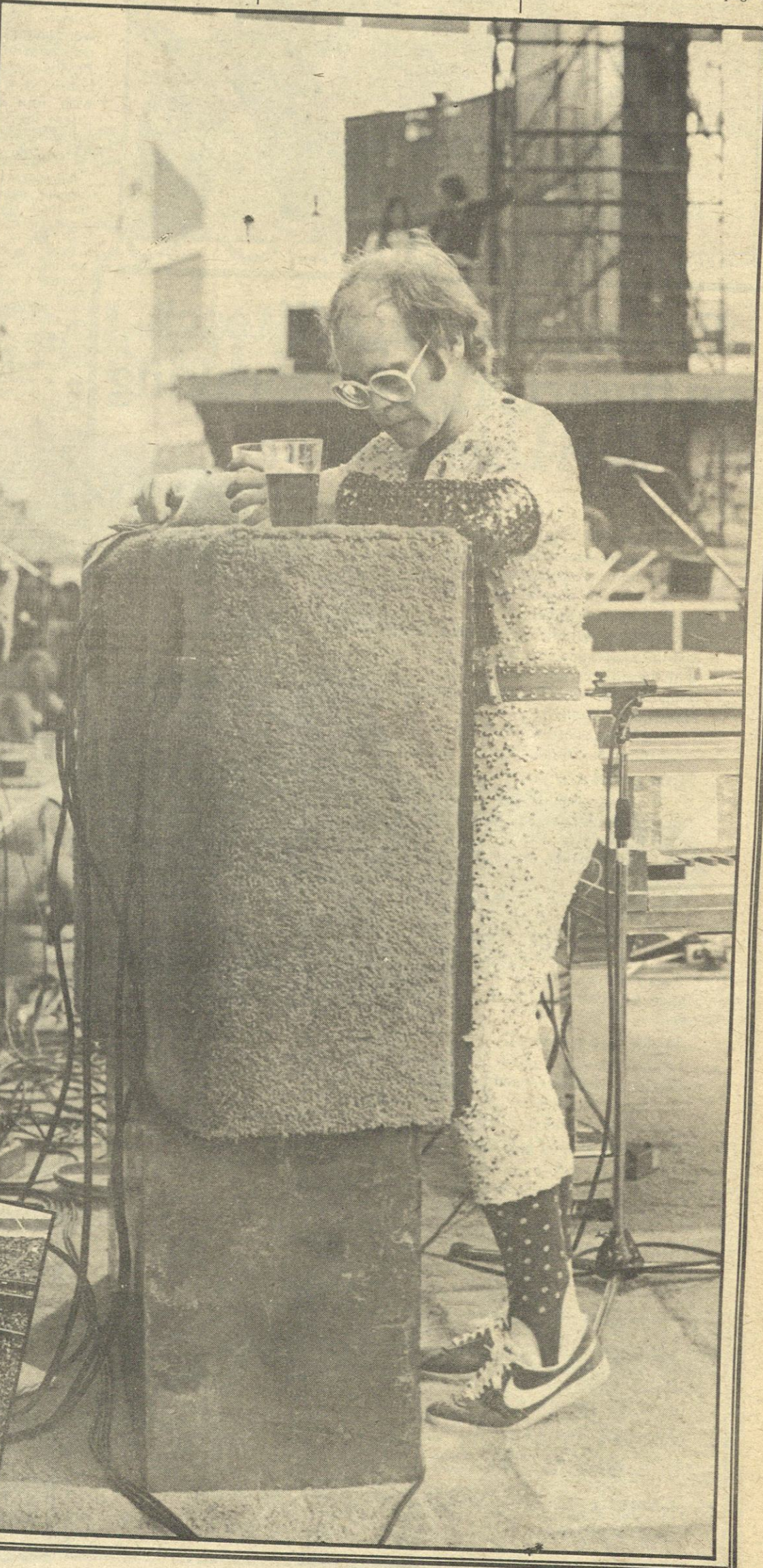
Tickets for the 55,000 seater Dodger Stadium gig sold out in half an hour.

Elton's records are played continuously on the LA radio stations. And "Rock Of The Westies" repeated the instant success of its predecessor "Captain Fantastic" by entering at number one in *Billboard's* album chart.

The Dodger gigs are in fact Elton's last Californian gigs for two years and mark the culmination of a 13 city US and Canadian tour — all gigs west of the Rockies, hence the album title. On average, the tour played to around 15,000 people a night.

Elton has, however, played California extensively during the past five years, last year doing five consecutive nights — 18,000 a night — at LA's Forum. And earlier this year he returned to The Troubadour to play six shows which raised 150,000 dollars for the Jules Stein Eye Institute; one of the

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Mother where are you?
Pix: TERRY O'NEILL

ELTON JOHN

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contractual riders for playing the club is that the artist must return five years later to play another series of dates.

And then there was the 1973 Hollywood Bowl party-concert at which he gave free T-shirts to everybody who attended.

AT SEEMINGLY every entertainment centre in LA the officials wear uniforms. At Disneyland the official guides (female) are kitted out in something resembling riding gear. They have the hats and the crops but break the style by wearing tartan mini-skirts and red knee-length socks. For each individual ride those in charge will be wearing appropriate threads, so that for The Pirates Of The Caribbean (one of the park's major attractions) the guys hustling you on and off are dressed up like pirates.

It's the same at Dodger Stadium where programme sellers, popcorn and hot-dog vendors, right through to the middle-aged gentlemen who keep intruders out of the press enclosure, are all dressed for the part.

Dodger Stadium is the nearest thing in Los Angeles to Wembley Stadium. It nestles up in the lower part of the Hollywood Hills and it's more or less diamond-shaped. It has three tiers and everything about it is brighter, cleaner and altogether more efficient than a British football ground.

What's more, its shape creates a more intimate atmosphere.

On this sunny Saturday lunch-time the place is full of yer actual archetypal sunny Californian kids. Everybody looks amazingly wholesome and it's a far cry from the downer-out atmosphere of a lot of East Coast gigs. Or for that matter the groupie-infested Rainbow Bar and Grill immediately adjacent The Roxy on Sunset Strip where the dogs have their claws out every night, hoping to catch a British musician (detectable by their lack of suntan).

During "Elton John Week" Robert Plant would often be found holding court there, the chicks zeroing in to his table like bees round a honey-pot.

At Dodger Stadium it's a different story. There's a genuine atmosphere of collective celebration and the kind of chicks you meet often look like they just fell out of a Brian Wilson beach fantasy. Even the plump girls somehow look good.

The gig is due to start at one p.m., but begins an hour early, that sweet voiced lady Emmy Lou Harris having the unenviable task of opening.

Lord only knows what Emmy Lou is doing on a gig this size. Her appearing at The Roxy or The Troubadour would make sense... but in front of 55,000 E.J. fans? Her band (which comes with her to Britain any day now) includes former Presley men James Burton (guitar) and Glenn D. Hardin (piano).

It was hardly the right circumstances to listen to the country singer but she didn't sound too bad even if the audience were more interested in building human pyramids, throwing frisbees, eating popcorn and hot dogs and drinking coke.

The previous dates on the Elton John tour were all without support acts and according to Wembley promoter Mel Bush, it took a good deal of persuading to convince Elton that he should have a strong support act at Wembley for his not-entirely successful gig there this summer.

Of that gig Reid commented: "Three-two to The Beach Boys. Elton made a slight mistake by playing the whole of 'Captain Fantastic' but he knew what he was doing when he went into it. I don't think it was a disaster."

As with Wembley, Joe Walsh is on the Dodger bill too. He's an LA-based musician, so it's surprising that the audience fail to show anything other than passing interest in him and his band, which on this day includes the normally ace rhythm section of Willie Weeks and Andy Newark plus Eagles' slide guitarist Don Felder plus a girl back-up vocal section.

The sound was persistently appalling with the result that Walsh's vocals were rendered redundant by over-amplified drums. Matters weren't helped by the overall sloppiness of the band.

In terms of material Walsh's set wasn't vastly different from the one he played at Wembley, including songs from all three Walsh albums.

His songs rely heavily on dynamics and therefore on a good sound system. What's more his material is over-stylised and it's not difficult to imagine that he's played the same number several times during one set.

However, he is undeniably a good



Elton saves! The church choir who came on for the climax.

guitarist and in tandem with Felder's own guitar, the music was occasionally exciting.

"YOU'RE BETTER OFF DEAD If You Haven't Heard Elton", shout the letters on the front of the custom-made T-shirt worn by one of the two black guys whose theatrical appreciation of their Hero is turning more than a few heads down here on the diamond, just right of the mobile Johns.

Their Hero is about a third through his second set. And he can't do anything wrong. These 55,000 sun-kissed Californians are here to see Elton John and they're lapping up each note of all 36 songs that eventually get played.

Elton took the stage a little after 2.40 p.m., opening logically enough with "Your Song", all alone at the piano, wearing a sequined baseball suit complete with cap. The reception was

tumultuous, one bound to impress the most hardened cynic.

"Your Song" could well be the best ballad in the John-Taupin collection and it sounds as perfectly poignant today as it did when first released even if those lyrics about 'buying a big house where we could both live if only I could afford it' don't quite ring true.

Elton greets his fanatical audience and tells them that he'll play for as long as they want him too. More applause; in fact there's so much damn clapping in the first ten minutes or so that it's a wonder all these Californian hands aren't canned-Tequilla Sunrise red.

"I Need You To Turn To" follows, after which he's joined by his six-piece band whose names are neon-ed-up (in alphabetical order, John's name first in a bigger type face) on the stadium's electric scoreboard. There's also a trio

of back-up singers sashaying about stage right.

Skunk Baxter's no longer in the band (according to Reid, he only joined for Wembley), so Elton has to make do with just Davey Johnstone and Caleb Quaye. Throughout the three-and-a-half-hour set, both players are more than excellent, playing classic rock-blues licks, fitting perfectly into the arrangements.

The sound is immaculate and everything about the gig is widely removed from the part-disaster that was Wembley.

Perhaps it's because of his success, but it is so easy to underestimate Elton's talents, especially his fine piano-playing which is always timed to give the music maximum buoyancy.

The sequined baseball hat is thrown into the audience after "Dan Dare", one of the few new songs included in this first set. The action inspires a joyous yell from the fans.

"Levon" from "Madman Across The Water" is dedicated to "The British music press who are totally deaf, especially the *New Musical Express* and particularly their writer who ought to clean his finger-nails."

Yes, readers, Elton's on the defensive and the remark receives a huge partisan cheer from those present, although it's probable a lot of them have never read a British music paper in their lives, let alone heard of CSM who really ought to do something about his grubby nails.

More defensive attitude later... when he hits back at those who've criticised his over-prolific output and alleged consequent tailing off of quality with, "If you like making music, then why not make it all the time." Or something along those lines.

"Country Comfort" and "Rocket Man" lead up to the rock 'n' roll climax of "Hercules" which literally has Dodger Stadium's three tiers rockin'. Elton assures them they haven't heard anything yet — "This is the slow set. The rock 'n' roll hasn't yet begun."

He closes with another rocker, this time "Empty Skies", the title cut of the first Elton John album which features one of his rare piano solos.

IT'S ROUND about the time of "Someone Saved My Life" that the two black guys finally start weeping, and you realise that the remark about

being better off dead if you haven't heard Elton is probably quite sincere. At the end of each successive song they both bow down to Elton, as if before Allah.

What's more these two know all the words to every song, and extend their fanaticism to the point where they actually mime the songs too.

It seems Elton's appeal goes right across the board and is no way prejudiced by sexuality. Onstage he has no sex as such. As a colleague said, you could take your girlfriend to an Elton gig without any fear of her falling in love with him.

John Reid says Elton sometimes thinks of himself as the Cliff Richard of rock 'n' roll. "I think people see him as an amiable, very talented eccentric, which he is."

"He has a very fun image. He's not Leon Russell, he's not Jerry Lee Lewis. He doesn't go round smashing up hotel rooms. Many people can identify with him."

"Elton saves," shriek the two black guys as the gig reaches climax point. Elton John is now being joined on stage by Billie Jean King, Bernie Taupin in a kilt, and finally a church choir.

Elton is the first rock star to play Dodger since The Beatles played it in 1966. So he includes "Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds" and a very fast take of "I Saw Her Standing There" complete with the "Day Tripper" riff leading the song into its chorus. The two shows grossed 1.1 million dollars which is probably a lot more than the Fab Four earned all those years ago, even when you take inflation into consideration.

"Pinball Wizard" and "Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting" are the finale and that's it.

THE INEVITABLE after-gig party doesn't take place until the Monday. It's held at a place called Le Restaurant, a favourite place of Rod Stewart's when he's in town. All things considered it's a very tame affair and unusually star-less.

Elton's band's there and so is his ex-drummer Nigel Olsson plus the man himself who looks very ordinary indeed, clad in a sweater not a million miles away from the kind of thing Val Doonican might wear. Perhaps John Reid had a point when he suggested that Elton John was the Cliff Richard of rock 'n' roll.